

**ARTICULATING AGENCY WITHIN SITES OF CONTESTATIONS IN
HARAPAN RAINFOREST:
PROBLEMATIZING PALM OIL PLANTATIONS IN JAMBI, INDONESIA**

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Abstract

The increasing global demand for palm oil due to the global new orientation on bio-fuels has affected the rapid expansion of the palm oil plantations in Indonesia. Previous research findings have shown there are multiple actors involved in the palm oil plantations; however, few have taken into account the social interactions between these actors in relation to specificity of the local context. This article problematize how the actors and networks intertwine with one another as sites of contestations and also negotiations. The main problem to be investigated is how these actors articulate their agencies within the socio-economic and cultural life of the communities, who live around forest conservation in Jambi province, namely Harapan Rainforest. Research findings show that the network of actors is problematic in a sense that each actor's agency is mostly overshadowed by their own "politics." Furthermore, from the ethnographic data, the locals in Jambi perceive and negotiate with this situation in their own framework of social network and cultural capital.

Keywords: palm oil plantation, network of actors, agency, peasants

Introduction

Oil palm plantations have developed massively in Indonesia since the early 1980s, even though the agro-fuels industry was not developed rapidly as today (Bachriadi *et al.* 2000). In the past, Indonesia's palm oil produce had been exported mostly to Europe directly or through processing mills in Malaysia to supply food, cosmetics and other daily consumption products industries. However, there increasing demand for palm oil within the global market since the last decade as the global new orientation on bio-fuels usages, the palm oil industry including expansion of oil palm plantations has been developing rapidly in Indonesia.

A joint research conducted by European Union and the Indonesian Department of Forestry in 2001 concluded around 4,279,300 hectares of 11.5 million hectares peat soil (*lahan gambut*) in Sumatra were to be converted into oil palm plantations. Until 2025, Indonesian government plans to increase palm oil production multi folds, with the total area under cultivation for oil palm expanding from 6.4 million hectares all over the country in 2006 to 26 million hectares in 2025 (Ernsting 2007: 27). Around 12 million more hectares have already been deforested, supposedly for oil palms, but have not been planted. In 2006, media reports about strategic alliance talks between Indonesia and Malaysia were published which suggested plans for a crude palm oil cartel (Ernsting 2007: 27). In Indonesia the largest investment deal was clinched at the beginning of 2005, when PT Smart (Sinar Mas Group) finalized a US\$5.5-billion investment deal with China National Offshore Oil

Corporation (CNOOC) and Hong Kong Energy. Another large Indonesian business group, Raja Garuda Mas, announced a US\$4-billion investment deal in May 2007, which includes oil palm plantations and a new biodiesel refinery on Sumatra (Ernsting 2007: 29). While a Sweden-based company, Sweden Bioenergy, plans to invest 103 million Euros to establish a *jatropha* plantation of 100,000 hectares and set up a bio-fuel processing plant in Indonesia (Padilla 2007: 12).

However, large companies do not monopolize this lucrative commodity since there are a number of actors that are articulating different agencies in these sites. The smallholder farmers are also interested in this commodity. Recent literature on the issues shows how smallholder farmer in Indonesia engage to cultivate oil palm. These smallholder farmers are converting existing rubber and other tree crops to oil palm in response to market prices. By working individually or following oil palm company plantation scheme, smallholder farmers wish to achieve income that enables them to improve their livelihoods significantly. (Jelsma et al., 2009; McCarthy and Cramb, 2009; McCarthy 2010; Feintrenie et al., 2010a; Feintrenie et al., 2010b; Rist et al., 2010; Therville et al. 2011; McCarthy et al., 2012; Schwarze et.al 2015). Based on previous research findings on the multiple actors that are involved in the palm oil plantations, I would like to problematize how the actors and networks intertwined. The main issue I am focusing on in this article is based on the early stages of my research which is how these actors articulate their agencies within the socio-economic and cultural life of the communities, who live around forest conservation in Jambi province, namely Harapan Rainforest.

Methods: Archival Research and Reflective Ethnography

The first research method is archival research in which I compile and collect information as much as possible from bulks of research results, documentations, which are collected in several prominent researches and advocacy institutions. Newspapers clippings and bulletins published in Bahasa Indonesia and English from local NGOs and research institutions, will also be used to support data and analysis in this research. The findings are then used reconstruct the conflict between SPI and PT. REKI by using mostly the data gathered from Komnas HAM (the Indonesia National Commissions of Human Rights) between July-September 2016. In addition to that, preliminary interviews were also conducted with several key figures such as Commissioner of Komnas HAM in Jakarta; SPI Leaders in Jakarta; Representation of PT. REKI in Bogor; and Researcher from IPB (Institute of Agriculture Bogor). These interviews are necessary to understand the situation in the conflict area. Based on the interviews, I conducted research on site to clarify and gather more information in Pangkalan Ranjau, Jambi.

The first fieldwork was conducted between September to November 2016, then followed in February-March 2017 in the communities of SPI in Pangkalan Ranjau, Jambi province. Prior to my arrival in the site, I approached the SPI provincial leader to gain information and access into the communities in Pangkalan Ranjau. It was uneasy at first to gain trust from the peasants in SPI communities. They tend to be suspicious towards researchers due to their previous experiences with several researchers from EFForTS, who were considered as part of PT. REKI. In addition to SPI members, I also conducted interviews as well as discussions with agrarian and environmental activists.

Finding the Gap: Issues in Previous Research on Palm Oil Plantations in Indonesia

There are hundreds of researches conducted either in academic sense, policy-oriented purposes or advocacy purposes related to oil palm plantations in Indonesia. These researches try to show and analyze its prospective contribution to the national economy, regional development and rural household income as well as to describe its negative impacts on ecological sustainability and social life of the rural community especially on land conflicts. However, the number of studies about the conflicting issue, land rights between the palm oil industry and the conserving the forest under the idea of climate change mitigation is very limited.

Among the few studies, there are several which are useful to highlight the development of ERC in Indonesia. One of them is conducted under the research collaboration between two countries, Indonesia and Germany. From Indonesia is Universitas Jambi, Institut Pertanian Bogor (West Java), Universitas Tadulako (Central Sulawesi) and The Indonesia Institute of Science (LIPI) meanwhile from Germany is Gottingen University. This 12 years of research collaboration is conducted under the theme of “Ecological and Socioeconomic functions of Tropical Lowland Rainforest Transformation System (Sumatera Indonesia)” or known as CRC990 or EFForTS Project. The main location is in Taman Nasional Bukit Duabelas (TNBD) and Harapan Rainforest, both in Jambi province.

An early article resulting from this research project related to land conflicts in Harapan rainforest was published by Jonas Hein and Heiko Faust (2014) “*Conservation, REDD+ and the struggle for land in Jambi, Indonesia*”. They argue that smallholder farmers used different authorities and discourse to access and legitimate land claims. Thus, the smallholders and indigenous groups are able to establish coalitions with different actors. From the coalitions, the smallholder and indigenous groups have the ability to maintain land claims within the Harapan rainforest. Even more, they argue that SPI as a member La Via Campesina (International Peasant Coalition) uses the conflict in Harapan rainforest to criticize REDD+ at the global level.

Second, research report made by Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC) (2014), “Indigenous rights vs agrarian reform in Indonesia. A case study from Jambi” (Irawan, 2014). This report highlights the conflict between Indigenous people communities called Suku Anak Dalam (SAD) 113 and PT. Asiatic Persada, a palm oil company. The location of this conflict is neighboring to the Harapan rainforest. In this conflict, SAD 113 has been trying to recover 3,550 hectares of customary land or *tanah ulayat*, which was abandoned by the palm oil company. What is interesting in this report is the story about the possibility to resolve the conflict by using a mediator assigned by the company. This report underlines the role of Impartial Mediator Network (IMN), a group of mediators for specifically resolving land and resources conflicts in Indonesia, which most of its the members used to be NGO activists. Even though these researches do not relate directly to the conflict in Harapan rainforest, the information about the issue and actors is useful.

The third analysis is from Reiner Buergin (2016), “Ecosystem restoration concessions in Indonesia: conflicts and discourse”. Buergin informs that conflicts and disputes involving local communities and PT. REKI are complex and intricately linked to broader social controversies. Many different actors playing in the conflicts have their own interest and agenda. Overall, there are two discursive battles on the Harapan rainforest, one of them focuses on nature conservation and the other one on social justice.

The Economic and Social Trajectory of Palm Oil Plantations in Indonesia

Despite economic benefits, one of the serious consequences for the expansion of oil palm plantation is deforestation and forest degradation in Indonesia. Based on the UNDP report (2008), Indonesia is one of the highest carbon emitters in the world. Between the years 2000-2009 deforestation rate in Indonesia reached 1.5 million hectares per year, whereas between the years 2009-2013 deforestation rates is 1.13 million hectares per year (FWI 2014). According to this report, the islands of Sumatra and Kalimantan have the most severe deforestation compared to other islands in Indonesia. The worst deforestation area in Indonesia is located in Riau province in Sumatra, which comprises about 690 thousand hectares, followed by three provinces in Kalimantan, namely Central Kalimantan with 619 thousand hectares, 448 thousand hectares of East Kalimantan and West Kalimantan with 426 thousand hectares. Similar to that, a study by Abood (2015) informs that forest clearing for timber, logging, oil palm, and mining accounted for nearly 45 percent of deforestation in Indonesia between 2000 and 2010. This study also reports forest loss for industrial concessions. According to this study, 14.7 million hectares of forest cleared in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, the Moluccas and Papua during the 2000s, with 6.6 million hectares within industrial concessions: 1.9 million hectares in rubber plantations; 1.8 million ha in logging concessions, 1.6 million ha in oil palm concessions, 0.9 million hectares in concessions with overlapping zoning, and 0.3 million hectares in coal mining concessions (Abood, et.al. 2015). Moreover, the use of fire to open up and clearing forest for plantation led to trans boundary haze, which also affected neighborhood countries. Due to intense trans boundary haze in 2015, the government of Indonesia was asked to tackle this problem more seriously.

In the early 2000s ministry of forestry together with national and transnational conservation organizations discussed and planned of new kind forest concessions called Ecosystem Restoration. Ecosystem restoration may not sound familiar among conservationists, because this is an innovation in the field of preservation of natural resources are relatively newly introduced, although in fact the efforts of study has been done. One study of restoration is quite intense in Asia, for example conducted by the Forest Restoration Research Unit of Chiang Mai Thailand University, which was established in 1994. A small group of people representing the Ministry of Forestry, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and Indonesia Bird Foundation developed this policy. It took four years before the Ministry of Forestry finally issued a permit regarding Forest Timber Exploitation-Ecosystem Restoration (IUPHHK-RE) in 2004. Until 2015, there are 15 ecosystem restoration concessions has been approved by ministry of environmental and forestry. Meanwhile, there are 50 applications for ecosystem concessions in Indonesia from different companies examines by the Ministry of Environmental and Forestry. The Government of Indonesia targeted 2,7 million hectare for ecosystem concessions from total 75 million hectare of forest production concessions area.

Based on this permit unproductive forest or natural forest management that expires can be managed for restoration. Ani Mardiasuti, Chairman of the Board of the Yayasan Burung Indonesia and also Professor of the Department of Forest Resources Conservation and Ecotourism at Bogor Institute of Agriculture (IPB) argues that restoration must be distinguished from the rehabilitation or reforestation. This is different from the concession of management timber industry, which is more focused on the exploitation and utilization of timber. Meanwhile, through ecosystem concession the concessionaires have the authority to manage and protect the habitat, and to store carbon. This

concession according to them is a new paradigm to govern, not only the forest and its habitat, but also the people who live within and in the surrounding of the forest area.

In accordance to the argument, Mangarah Silalahi, Head of the Strategic Partnership of PT. REKI (Restorasi Ekosistem Indonesia - Indonesia Ecosystem Restoration Company) which is located in Jambi, added that managing of natural production forests with ecosystem restoration has the potential to reduce the greenhouse emissions. Moreover, he said that this concession certainly also has tremendous benefits in terms of non-timber forest products. In addition to the benefits of climate change mitigation through the reduction of greenhouse emissions and economic benefits, ecosystem restoration is also instrumental in saving biodiversity and food security of the people. Ecosystem restoration is thus seen as a way to maintain the natural forest in production forest, conservation of biodiversity, preservation of state assets, and to encourage better forest governance. It also has the flexibility in business management partnership with communities, especially indigenous people in the forest area (interview with Mangarah Silalahi, Kepala Kemitraan Strategis PT. REKI, on 24 August 2016).

The first Ecosystem Restoration Concession (ERC) for PT. REKI was granted in 2007, formed by a consortium of Bird Indonesia, Bird Life International and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. This first concession is located in 52,170 hectares of production forest in South Sumatra province. Three years later, PT REKI obtained similar permit for 46,385 hectares of production forest in Jambi province adjacent to the first concession. Both concessions are then known as the Harapan Rainforest (picture 1). Initially PT. REKI received funding from members of RSPB and Bird Life's partners in several countries, such as Switzerland, Belgium, Singapore, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. European Union, KfW Germany, DANIDA Denmark, and companies such as Singapore Airlines are also part of their funding. Currently, the main support for the company is provided by DANIDA with US\$ 30 million and Singapore Airlines.

Claims of Ownerships: Conflicts in *Harapan Rainforest* (Jambi)

The trend of increasing demand for oil palm products in global market and the expectation to increasing national income from this industry have made those Southern developing countries rush to pass pro bio-fuel legislation and implement policies to take advantage of this investment. Among the countries that passed pro-agro-fuels laws and regulations, for instance, are Argentina, China, Colombia, and Ecuador of South America region; India of South Asia region; Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines of Southeast Asia region; Mexico of Central America; Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia of East Africa region; Senegal of West Africa region; and South Africa of South Africa region (Padilla 2007: 4). Biofuels Digest reported in 2013, 62 countries around the world had approved agro-fuels mandate.

Although the debates on environmental impacts and climate change are ongoing (see Ernsting 2007: 25-26), opening new areas for large scale plantation estates to produce raw materials not only for conventional products of oil palm but also for the purposes of agro-fuels has been taking place in these countries in recent decades. In the Southeast Asia region, a number of domestic and foreign corporations have invested their capital in this industry (Casson 2000, Colchester *et al.* 2006, Colchester *et al.* 2007, Ernsting 2007, and Padilla 2007). Moreover governments in this region with financial assistance from the World Bank, European Union and Asian Development

Bank are competing with each other to provide facilities, subsidies and other incentives for this fast growing industry (Ernsting 2007: 26; Colchester 2006: 22; Casson, *et.al.* 2007).

Jambi, as one of the provinces in the island of Sumatra located along the eastern coast of Central Sumatera, has to face the same problem of deforestation and forest degradation due to rapid expansion of palm oil industry. The years 1993 to 1994 were the beginning of the establishment of the state-owned plantation company, PT Perkebunan Nusantara (PTPN). The first plantations established in the sub-districts of Sungai Bahar, Bunut, and Sungai Merking. In 2000, the Governor of Jambi, Zulkifli Nurdin, launched a campaign for "One Million Hectare Oil Palm Plantation Development" to accelerate its production based on the information obtained from the website of Plantation Bureau of Jambi Province. By the end of 2008, there were 34 oil palm companies located in 7 districts in Jambi. In 2012, oil palm plantations in Jambi had reached 515,300 hectares according to report by Jambi agriculture agency. According to Jambi provincial statistics, currently there are 38 registered oil palm companies, as shown in picture 2.

The current area of Harapan Rainforest is the former location of HPH (Hak Pengusahaan Hutan-Natural Forest Management Permit) owned by PT. Asialog and it shares borders with the area of production forest and palm oil plantations, such as PT. Asiatic Persada, Agronusa, Perkebunan Inti Rakyat (Nucleus-estate Plantation) in Sungai Bahar, PT Agronusa, and PT Alam Lestari Nusantara. The area of Harapan Rainforest is a natural habitat for flora and fauna, as well as home for indigenous people community Suku Anak Dalam (SAD) Batin Sembilan and also peasant communities. Through the course of time, this area becomes a contested land. All of the stakeholders in Harapan rainforest strive to legitimate their claims over the land. One of them is peasant community Serikat Petani Indonesia (Indonesia Peasant Union) in Pangkalan Ranjau, which has been occupying the land since 2002 after Asialog abandoned it. PT. REKI considered SPI as "*perambah*" or looters of the area.

According to SPI, about 700 families (around 2,000 people) live in their territory. They live in the area of Pangkalan Ranjau, Bukit Sinyal, Sungai Jerat, Tanjung Mandiri, Alam Sakti, Bahar Subur and Sialang Batuah. Most of them are migrants from North Sumatra, Lampung, Bengkulu, and Java. The first wave of migration to the forest was in 2002 and reached its peak in 2007-2008 right before the PT. REKI was granted the area for ERC. Together with indigenous peoples of SAD in Pangkalan Ranjau, the SPI members are claiming their rights over the forest when PT. REKI intimidating them in 2010. This situation led into clash between SPI member and PT. REKI in 2012.

In order to oust the SPI members from the forest, PT REKI used physical forces and criminalization. The company formed public opinion against the peasants and created the assumption that the peasants were violent and destructive. However, according to the SPI, it was the company who started the conflict. For example, on October 5, 2010, several members of SPI were arrested and beaten by the police and the security forces of PT REKI. Another incident happened on July 23, 2012 when two SPI members were arrested while attending discussion with forestry office in Batanghari regency about land conflict in forest area. These two SPI members were the main leaders in the Pangkalan Ranjau. A report made by PT. REKI about managing conflict in Harapan Rainforest inform that "methods of arrest and intimidation of their leader do not make them deterrent". Besides the leaders, 13 of SPI members were also arrested by a joint team of the Special unit of Forest Police (SPORC), Brimob Indonesian Police, and security of PT. REKI on October 18, 2012. PT REKI also used civilian militia called Laskar Melayu Jambi to intimidate and abduct SPI

leaders in Jambi.

Mangarah Silahahi agreed that between 2010-2012 PT. REKI managed the conflict inappropriately. Therefore, since 2013 PT. REKI has been campaigning a new conflict resolution by promoting mediation. This campaign involves many environmental and agrarian activists, as well as organizations both in national and international level. The institutions such as AGRA (Aliansi Gerakan Reforma Agraria-Agrarian Reform Movement Alliance), Impartial Mediator Network (IMN), Scale Up, and Forest Peoples Programme are among the players in mediating the conflict in Harapan rainforest. As a result, in 2015 two communities in Kunangan Jaya I and Kunangan Jaya II who were involved in conflict with PT. REKI have agreed to collaborate with the company. However, the conflict in Harapan rainforest remains unsolved.

The “Locals” and their Agency: The Story of Aki Entar

Aki Entar is one of the residents in Sungai Jerat who have been living in the village since 2008. Aki is common appellation for male elderly in West Java (Sundanese). Its literal meaning is grandfather. He migrated from Tasikmalaya, West Java. Prior to his arrival to Sungai Jerat, he lived in Bengkulu, where he owns 6 hectares of plantation. Entar and his wife moved to Sungai Jerat along with 30 other people. He cleared 10 hectares of land and planted it with rubber tree, oil palm and other *palawija*. Plantation is his main source of income. He was actively involved in the struggle against PT. REKI since 2009/2010, when this company started to spread threats to the peasants. Entar is not afraid of PT. REKI because in his opinion, he is entitled to work on the land in Sungai Jerat. PT. Asialog abandoned the land and he has been working on it since 2008, meanwhile PT. REKI signed the agreement with Indonesian government in 2010. Entar also finds the government unfair to give the right to cultivate the land to PT. REKI instead of to the peasants.

Aki Entar is a former SPI Base Leader, who was responsible to organize the peasants' lands. But after several years, he felt that SPI cares merely for its political agenda and omits the interest of its members. Aki Entar was disappointed because his contributions (marching, supporting SPI's activities financially) did not give him anything in return. He decided to resign in 2016 and joined SAD instead. Now he serves as a spokesperson for SAD, and his main responsibility is concerning the religious aspect in this community. Entar finds SAD more rational and is able to provide full protection to his land because as indigenous people, the SAD has been residing there for the longest time. When Aki Entar decided to join SAD, it is not surprising to see the rest of the residents in Sundanese Block follow his lead. Now, all peasants in Entar's group are the members of SAD. In his words, Entar stated, “it is not the matter of making them SAD. It is the matter of providing protection for their lands.” Entar is not the only former SPI member who is disappointed with this organization. Tatang, the former coordinator of SPI also feels abandoned by his organization and decided to resign in October 2016. He felt betrayed because in several cases, SPI appointed someone else to do his duties.

The story of Aki Entar reflects how the “locals” who are actually migrants who came to Jambi area decades ago are negotiating or even contesting the dominant actors, such as the government, PT REKI or even SPI. I argue that even though in previous research, locals are often considered merely as victims of the capitalist palm oil businesses actually have agency. Their attachment to the land they have lived in for so many years and their social and also cultural capital

are in itself empowering them to convey their contestation toward the government and PT REKI. Research findings reveal that collectiveness encompassed within the social networking of the peasants (the locals) is a source of empowerment that could elevate the locals' bargaining (negotiating) power with the other actors.

Conclusion

This article has explained the issues concerning oil palm agro industry in Indonesia and its negative impacts, which may occur on ecological sustainability, as well as affecting deleteriously the socio-economic and cultural life of the communities, particularly those who live around forest conservation in Jambi province, namely Harapan Rainforest. Research findings show that the network of actors involved in the ecosystem restoration is problematic in a sense that each actor's agency is mostly overshadowed by their own "politics." On the other hand, the locals in Jambi perceive and negotiate with this situation in their own framework of social network and cultural capital. As this article is based on my early stages of research, more findings and more discussions should be made in order to further problematize the relationship between the actors in the palm oil plantation problems in Indonesia.

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mindsets. The Mexican Telenovela *Husband for Hire* particularly as a paradigm for film

